Testimony of
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Regarding
Ensuring Operability During Catastrophic Events
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for inviting me to talk with you today about the Forest Service and its interagency partners experience with the Incident Command System and communications during emergency response. I understand the Subcommittee is familiar with the Incident Command System so I would like to describe how the Forest Service and its partners use the Incident Command System and related systems developed over the years to respond to wildland fires and also to all-hazard incidents.

Incident Command System

The Forest Service, the Department of the Interior agencies, and our partners operate the largest wildland fire management program in the world. These agencies and partners pioneered the use of the Incident Command System (ICS), as a component of the National Interagency Incident Management System (NIIMS) in the 1970s, in order to respond to wildland fires. Wildland firefighters realized that a standard organizational structure would help them communicate, set priorities, and be more effective in a rapidly changing situation. Emergency and crisis events are often chaotic and highly dynamic; they create physical, emotional, and social disruption. The Incident Command System provides common terminology for position titles, resources, and facilities; common responsibilities for each position, common planning, common communications, common locations, and common incident objectives to unify the Forest Service, Department of the Interior agencies, Tribal, State, and local organizations to fight a fire or respond to other types of emergency situations.

During fire season, critical firefighting needs are coordinated through the National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. If fire-fighting resources are strained as a result of multiple simultaneous fires, resources are prioritized and allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group. These efforts ensure assets are appropriately prioritized, allocated, and can be positioned based on the most up-to-date information.

Interagency Incident Management Teams dispatched to incidents are comprised of emergency response professionals from Federal, Tribal, State, and local wildland fire organizations. These teams are able to use their logistical, organizational, and adaptation skills to rapidly deploy

people and resources from many areas and respond to a wide variety of tasks needed during emergencies. For large multi-jurisdictional incidents, a unified command is used. In many cases, the use of unified command is the most efficient means to facilitate communications with all first responders. By having a representative of each jurisdiction at the incident command post, managers can share incident information down to each of their respective responders.

The ability of the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior agencies, and their partners to respond with trained and experienced personnel is based upon the interagency incident qualifications and certifications. These were developed in conjunction with the Incident Command System and are overseen by a group of fire directors for all five federal land management agencies and representatives of States that have wildfire suppression responsibilities. The system documents all training, experience, certifications, authorities, licenses, minimum qualifications, and physical fitness standards for about 28,000 permanent and temporary employees of the Forest Service. The automated part of this system is known as the Incident Qualification and Certification System (IQCS). IQCS stores data, prints reports and qualifications cards, and provides data to other systems.

IQCS is tied to the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS); qualified personnel can be quickly identified and dispatched to an incident. ROSS is used by more than 400 dispatch offices serving numerous Federal, State, County and municipal agencies. ROSS assists dispatchers and coordinators with information on the availability and location of crews, management personnel, equipment, aircraft, supplies, and services. Resources can be requested, mobilized, and tracked to and from the incident. In addition, allocation of resources at a regional or national level can be accomplished. ROSS, along with interagency dispatch and coordination, allows managers to identify and mobilize resources from around the country to the incident within 12 to 24 hours. At the incident, Incident Management Teams use ROSS data to support resource status tracking, cost reporting, and planning efforts.

Forest Service units across the nation have had emergency operations plans for many years. They also developed interagency operating plans describing how the unit and its other Federal, Tribal, State, and local cooperators will work together during an emergency incident. A key component to emergency operations plans is communications. These plans include items such as which radio frequencies are going to be used, the sharing of radio equipment, and standardized formats for information flow from the incidents. All of this planning is to improve communications and effective incident management.

In his Directive on Management of Domestic Incidents (HSDP-5), President Bush instructed the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a National Incident Management System that is closely modeled on the wildland fire system, including the use of the Incident Command System. In 2004, the Department of Homeland Security issued the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Under the terms of HSPD-5, all Federal Departments and agencies will use the NIMS in their domestic incident management activities, as well as those actions taken in support of State or local entities. In addition, state and local entities are to adopt the NIMS a requirement for receiving Federal preparedness assistance through grants, contracts, or other activities.
I would like to give you an example of the adaptability of the Incident Command System. After September 11, 2001, the Forest Service trained the Fire Department of New York City in the

Incident Command System. In response to Hurricane Katrina, the Fire Department of New York Incident Management Team assisted the New Orleans Fire Department initially in fire protection and then in the inspection of buildings and reopening fire stations in New Orleans. Incident Management Teams are managing or managed the base camps in Jackson Square and Holy Cross and are providing the New Orleans Fire Department preliminary training in the Incident Command System.

Communications

Effective communications are critical in all emergency responses. When the concept of the Incident Command System was developed, three components were identified involving communications: 1) common terminology including clear text; 2) a communication plan to provide information to responders via radio; and, 3) an incident management plan to provide common written direction. Over the past 30 years, these components have proven essential during the response to wildfires and other emergencies. The result is improved communications within the emergency response community.

In an emergency, all forms of communications must be well organized and coordinated. As the Forest Service prepares each year for the upcoming fire season, many units agree to mutual aid frequencies and protocols with their interagency cooperators. Wildland fire agencies reduce the potential for radio frequency and compatibility problems by planning and providing communications systems during emergencies. The radio cache located at the National Interagency Fire Center is the largest civilian cache – over 5000 –of radios in the United States. Radios are dispatched in kits including repeaters, hand held radios, and necessary antennas to set-up communication systems. These systems allow responders to be given radios and assigned frequencies which are sometimes added for unique situations. Every Incident Management Team mobilized by wildland fire agencies has access to these systems. This was done after September 11, 2001 when the National Interagency Fire Center communications personnel were dispatched to New York City within 12 hours to set up the necessary communication links so critical in an emergency.

A vital link to success for the National Incident Management System (NIMS) is communication interoperability at a level appropriate to the requirements of each circumstance. Radio frequency and equipment compatibility issues among Federal, Tribal, State, and local emergency responders, as well as the Department of Defense, National Guard, and Reserves have been noted in past incident response evaluations. One example is the California Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission report which found communications to be a major problem during the fires in Southern California in October 2003. The Commission's Finding #1 states "Communications interoperability is essential in the effective command and control of personnel and resources during multi-agency, multidiscipline responses to major incidents."

Local agencies often operate on different bandwidths than do Federal, Tribal, State and other local agencies. During joint responses, communications protocols must be pre-planned to ensure a positive communications capability is in place. Congress mandated a restructuring of the Federal Radio Frequency Spectrum requiring Federal Agencies to transition to narrowband FM frequencies by January 1, 2005. Each wildland fire agency is currently planning, executing, and

funding the transition. State, local, Tribal, and cooperating agencies are not required to transition until 2013, although many have implemented or started the transition process.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

I would like to say a few words regarding the Forest Service involvement following two major hurricanes: Category 4 Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall on the Gulf coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and the Florida Panhandle on August 29, and Category 3 Hurricane Rita which made landfall on the southwest coast of Louisiana and northeast coast of Texas on September 24, 2005. Forest Service response efforts really cover the entire spectrum of the disaster. The ability of the Forest Service and its partners to respond is based upon years of experience in the use of the Incident Command System, IQCS, ROSS, and communications during wildfires.

The Forest Service is the primary agency for the Emergency Support Function #4 – firefighting - and is also a support agency to 11 of the 15 Emergency Support Functions in the National Response Plan. The Forest Service has been tasked with more than 50 missions since requests for assistance from FEMA began shortly before Hurricane Katrina struck. The National Interagency Fire Center and the Geographical Area Coordination Center in Atlanta, Georgia managed the mobilization of crews and interagency Incident Management Teams from across the country and assigned those teams to missions along the Gulf Coast.

Interagency support peaked October 1 with 29 Incident Management Teams that used the Incident Command System in the management of their operations. Approximately 5,500 people including 139 crews, and 1,300 management and support personnel, all qualified in the IQCS system were assigned. In addition, 2,700 pieces of equipment and 20 helicopters and fixed winged aircraft were mobilized and tracked through ROSS.

In the days after Hurricane Katrina, interagency Incident Management Teams managed all-agency radio/phone/data communications, coordinated the receiving and distribution of trailers for housing and thousands of truckloads of supplies, provided evacuees with food, clothing and shelter, and supported emergency medical operations at the New Orleans base camp. Interagency Incident Management Teams have managed evacuation centers in Phoenix, AZ, and Houston and San Antonio, TX. Teams are providing base camp operations and support to emergency responders in 14 locations in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Camp operations include feeding, billeting, showers, and laundry for emergency personnel. Disaster mortuary operations have been supported by base camps run by interagency Incident Management Teams.

Seventeen Interagency Buying Teams have been an integral part of the hurricane response effort. These teams have purchased food, portable toilets, fuel, safety gear, medical supplies, or leased land, buildings, or equipment as needed to support the Incident Management Teams.

The National Forest, Research, and State and Private Forestry branches of the Forest Service have begun extensive coordination with the affected states, other federal agencies, and industry associations to assist with managing the large scale ecological disturbance caused by the hurricanes. The Forest Service is working in concert with the State Foresters of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas to help private landowners with immediate

problems of downed timber removal and longer term questions involving storage and production capacity. Interagency teams are in place and are working with the States to plan for long range fuel mitigation, fire readiness and prevention, and fire suppression. Fire prevention education teams are also working with local agencies, media, and publics in stressing caution about hurricane debris disposal. Additional firefighting crews and equipment have been moved to the Gulf Coast in anticipation of increased fire activity.

Summary

Mr. Chairman, the Forest Service, in its one hundred year history, has responded to many emergencies and incidents ranging from major fires, to insect infestations to hurricanes. All of these have tested the agency's and its partners' management skills and abilities. The systems that have been developed and tested over and over again are useful and adaptable. I am glad the Forest Service could contribute to responding to the emergency after the hurricanes. I would be happy to answer your questions.